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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the need for gay and lesbian relationship research and theory and some of the directions such research and theory might take. It suggests academic research into gay and lesbian relationships is needed because these relationships are a fact of modern life and are different from heterosexual relationships, and because such research and theory is prerequisite to advice, remediation, and/or intervention and will contribute to relationship understanding as a whole. Socio-political needs for research and theory are based on legitimization and the ability to use knowledge to lessen fear and discrimination and to secure equitable rights. The paper concludes that research directions might include: (1) application of heterosexual relationship study approaches to homosexual relationships; (2) examination of patterns of relationship development in gay and lesbian couples; (3) workplace studies and discrimination; (4) violence; (5) exploration of cultural influences and attitudes toward gay and lesbian relationships; (6) the role of friendship; (7) erasing stereotypes, particularly in relation to social and political consequences; and (8) identification of advantages and disadvantages of affectional orientation self-disclosure. (Contains 31 references.) (EF)

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Theory and Research in Gay and Lesbian Relationships

Joseph A. DeVito

Because this topic is so broad I thought it would be appropriate to limit this paper to two aspects of this general topic—namely the need for gay and lesbian relationship research and theory and some of the directions that such research and theory might take. In the process, we'll be able to identify something of what we know about gay and lesbian relationships and some things we don't know.

Some Academic and Socio-Political Reasons for the Study of Gay and Lesbian Relationships

Research and theory on gay and lesbian relationships are needed for both academic and socio-political reasons.

Academic Needs

There are several academic reasons for studying gay and lesbian relationships. Here are just a few.

(1) Gay and lesbian relationships are a fact of modern life. And probably have always been—evidence apparently existing even in the tombs of ancient Egypt (*Dallas Morning News*, 7/20/98)—two manicurists, it would seem, and we wonder, with Woody Allen, "if Socrates and Plato took a house on Crete during the summer." Research shows that approximately 60% of the gay and lesbian population are in relationships (buddybuddy.com/survey-m.html).

Whether the interest in permanent relationships by gay men and lesbians is due to their following the norms of the heterosexual society, the legal benefits that are becoming available to domestic partners, the fear of AIDS, or some genetic predisposition to form unions—it does not mean that all gay men and all lesbians should be coupled or that coupling is better than singlehood—in bringing interpersonal satisfaction or in conforming to some arbitrary morality rule that says relationships are better. Similarly, even the frequency of relationships or their longevity should not be taken to have moral implications.

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(2) Gay and lesbian relationships are different from heterosexual relationships; data on one is not necessarily transferable to the other. On the most obvious level, gays and lesbians grow up and mature into a society (and often an immediate family) that is hostile at best and life threatening at worst—the brutal deaths of Matthew Shepard and Barry Winchell, for example, are recent reminders that the hostility is ever present and ever vicious. And the recent case of California State Senator William J. Knight who has been fighting for passage of a law to ban state recognition of same-sex marriages while rejecting his gay son and gay brother who recently died of AIDS illustrate the all-too-familiar family hostility (*New York Times*, October 17, 1999, p. 26).

A survey of 496 lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered youth found that 14% experienced physical abuse, 28% physical harassment, 47% sexual harassment, and 61% verbal harassment (*Advocate*, October 26, 1999, p. 14). And, according to a Report of the Massachusetts Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth, 97% of the students in public schools reported regularly hearing homophobic remarks from other students (as reported in the *Blue Stone Press*, October 15, 1999, p. 4).

Almost 1 out of every 5 male community college students reported that they personally "physically assaulted or threatened someone they thought was a lesbian or gay man" (badpuppy.com/gaytoday/garchive/world/081998w.htm). In 1996 there were 2,529 reported cases of anti-gay harassment and violence in 14 cites in the US; of those reported 95% were against individuals and 5% were against property (pflag.org/pom/hate.html). From 1990 to 1995, anti-gay violence rose 102% (pflag.org/pom/hate.html).

In another study 80% of prospective teachers reported negative attitudes to gay and lesbian people and fewer than 1 out of 5 guidance counselors receive any training on how to serve gay and lesbian youths (Sears 1992). So, it's a very different relationship world for gay men and lesbians and for heterosexuals.

As a result of some of these differences and the familiar political and social obstacles, the values placed on relationship permanence by homosexual and heterosexual may be different. For example, some studies find that gay and lesbian relationships last for shorter periods of time and are less exclusive than heterosexual relationships. This gap does lessen in comparisons from 1980 to 1992—the length and the exclusivity increased from 1980 to 1992 (Bringle, 1995). On the other hand, you have isolated cases like Denmark where the divorce rate for gay marriages was 1.31, compared to the heterosexual rate of 2.95 and the US rate of 3.86% and where gay male relationships averaged 8.9 years compared to the heterosexual average of 7.1 years (bway.net/~halsall/lgbh/lbbh-gaystats.html). Still another study reports that the breakup rate for couples together at least 10 years was 6% for lesbians, 4% for gay men, and 4% for

heterosexual marrieds (capitalgay.com/information/relationship-myths.htm). But, regardless of what the studies show, the findings should never be taken as a sign of morality; length and permanence of a relationship have nothing to do with morality.

This, of course, is not an axiom that is universally accepted. For example, Martin and Nakayama (1997, p. 221) note: "The dissolution of heterosexual relationships often is delayed due to family and society pressures, religious beliefs, custody battles, and so on. However, some gay relationships probably terminate at a much earlier time because they are not subject to these pressures. This also may mean that, even though they are shorter lived, gay relationships are happier and mutually productive." Although Martin and Nakayama don't explicitly argue that longevity and happiness should be related, the connection seems implied and that assumption, I think, is a mistake; it's an example of buying into a heterosexual and religious model of relationships that doesn't really work terribly well.

Because the vast majority of gay people grow up in a heterosexual environment, they learn the norms and rules of heterosexual society which are, not surprisingly, pro heterosexual and anti gay. And also not surprisingly, these factors—together with lots of others—often result in an internalized homophobia among gay men and lesbians themselves—a problem that adversely affects intimacy (Meyer and Dean 1998).

For example, gay male couples almost invariably face antagonism from their parents (LaSala 1998) and their peers. In one study, for example, heterosexual university students were found to believe that gay relationships are inferior to heterosexual relationships—"the depth of feeling and commitment was not the same" they reported. (Testa, Kinder, Ironson 1987). This is of course not surprising in a world where people can be put to death for homosexual relationships, where billboards in Idaho protest a gay friendly PBS television show, and where poor Will, it seems, will always be single though he strives for a relationship.

And, as Will reminds us, the media doesn't tolerate functional gay or lesbian relationships—a rule that Ellen DeGeneres broke by daring to present a functional homosexual relationship. Fred Jandt (1995, p. 365) puts this most effectively: "Society may have become more accepting of individual gay men and lesbians but it may, ironically, still reject same-sex couples who are more likely to be traditional in values and roles than are nongay and nonlesbian couples."

None of this is to say that there are no similarities; in fact, there are—so many in fact that some researchers would argue that no distinction need be made, for example, in the intervention strategies that therapists might use (Kurdek 1991). Among the similarities noted are: (1) the reasons for separation or level of

separation distress (Kurdek 1997); (2) the issue argued about in conflict episodes (Kurdek 1994); (3) the overall performance on such measures as stability and commitment, conflict, and interpersonal violence (Sarantakos 1996); and (4) conflict resolution styles (Metz, Rosser, and Strapko 1994). Fitzpatrick, Jandt, Myrick, and Edgar (1994)—in one of the few studies done in the field of communication—found both similarities and differences; both homosexual and heterosexual couples group themselves into traditionals, independents, and separates but the percentages of couples in each category varied among lesbian, gay male, and heterosexual couples.

(3) Research and theory on gay and lesbian relationships is prerequisite to relational advice, remediation, or intervention. Without it, without knowing how such relationships develop, are maintained, breakdown, and are repaired, we are without the foundation information necessary to offer counseling or help for gay and lesbian couples. Suggestions, counseling, therapy or whatever you call it—concerning increasing relationship satisfaction, resolving conflicts, using maintenance and repair strategies and whatever else you might mention—will be based on anecdotal and often misleading information. Yet, this doesn't stop authors from writing about how to improve gay and lesbian relationships. For example, a recent publication by Mackey, O'Brien, and Mackey 1997), offers advice on such topics as conflict avoidance, intimacy, social support, and decision making—all on the basis of 36 couples.

We need more and better research before offering relationship advice. We need to close the gap between the research on heterosexual and homosexual relationships—in terms of the sophistication of the research as well as in terms of its breadth (Deenen, Gijs, and Van-Naerssen 1995). A particularly clear example of the lack of research on gay and lesbian relationships—at least on the level of popularized research—occurred when I searched Barnes and Noble's online bookstore for "research gay relationships." Three items were pulled up. The first was *Breastfeeding and HIV/AIDS,* the third was *Biosafety Guidelines for Diagnostic and Research Laboratories Working with HIV,* and the second was John Ankerberg's *The Facts on Homosexuality* of which its publisher's note says: "This solidly-documented reference guide demolishes the media myths surrounding homosexuality and points the way to freedom for those caught in the homosexual lifestyle."

There is, of course, the *Journal of Homosexuality* and many of the other academic journals are becoming more gay-lesbian friendly and there are collections like DeCecco's (1988) *Gay Relationships*. And there are responsible presentations of relationship models as in Lees and Nelson's (1999) *Longtime Companions*. But, we need more.

(4) Research and theory on gay and lesbian relationships will contribute to understanding and making more effective other kinds of relationships, as does research on any segment clarify the whole—in this case the world of interpersonal relationships. In fact, heterosexual couples might also learn something from gay and lesbian relationships. Lillian Faderman (1999), for example, has argued that "heterosexual professional couples might do well to ponder the domestic arrangements of the lesbian pioneers." And, we might add in maintaining truthful and honest relationships; perhaps not surprisingly, research finds that there is less deception in gay and lesbian relationships than in heterosexual relationships (Burdon 1996). Another example: heterosexual men have higher levels of jealousy than do gay men which takes on even more interesting proportions when we remember that level of jealousy is inversely correlated with level of self-actualization—the more jealous you are the less self-actualized you're likely to be (Hawkins, 1990). And, of course, there seems evidence that gay relationships do influence straight relationships and that connection needs to be explored (Strathern, 1997).

Socio-Political Needs

Especially in this age of multiculturalism, the omissions in the study of gay and lesbian relationships seem totally inappropriate academically. But, these omissions are totally convenient for many social and political purposes. After all, if you don't talk about it, it hardly exists. And even if it does exist, it doesn't really count. And so it's not surprising to realize that there are also socio-political needs for developing theory and research on gay and lesbian relationships.

Without such research, gay and lesbian relationships are viewed as random events—without a pattern—and so lose a certain legitimacy in the popular mind. Research and theory will help to signal a presence; studying something makes it real. And so academic research in gay and lesbian relationships makes them real to those who, like Bill Bradley, knows gay men and lesbians but has none in his entire family (Bull 1999).

Research and theory integrated into communication, psychology, and sociology courses and textbooks tell readers that such relationships can and do exist and that they are legitimate to discuss, to read about, and to enter into. From such research and theory, models will emerge, models that may be very different from those that appear in the tabloids or on television. A good use for such models is to counter the heterosexual bias in the perception of loving relationships: Gay and lesbian couples are seen as being less satisfied and as less in love than are comparable heterosexual couples (Testa, Kinder, and Ironson 1987). These types of attitudes are especially important when we realize that, at least according to one report, boys are coming out at an average age of 15 (down

from 26 a decade ago) and girls at 16 (down from 28 a decade ago) (*Blue Stone Press*, October 15, 1999, p. 4).

Research and theory will say, in effect, that gay and lesbian relationships matter; they are worthy of study and attention and interest. They are worth recording into our history and our culture. Without such studies, gay men and lesbians fade into the background and become a footnote to the studies of heterosexual couples or are totally ignored as in the vast number of studies who purport to study interpersonal romantic relationships but cast all survey instructions into a heterosexual format, and then never bother to qualify their study with the word heterosexual, as if heterosexual was all there was.

On the general principle that knowledge lessens fear and that lessened fear lessens discrimination directed at other groups, research and theory in gay and lesbian relationships will help reduce the violence and general inequities that exist between heterosexual and homosexual relationships that come from fear of the unknown. In reducing this fear research and theory will help gay men and lesbians secure the rights that others enjoy—health insurance for a lover, the rights of inheritance, and medical decision-making rights and, of course, the right to adoption and to marriage. This is especially important at a time when same-sex marriage is on the agenda of most gay and lesbian organizations and yet all major presidential candidates oppose it—probably the most important issue facing gay men and lesbians and certainly the most important influencing factor on the current stage of gay and lesbian relationships.

Fitzpatrick, Jandt, Myrick, and Edgar (1994, p. 266) offer another reason why the study of homosexual relationships is so important. "Understanding the factors that hold couples together as well as those that drive them apart may help in dealing with the AIDS crisis. Although AIDS represents a serious medical problem, successful interventions require an understanding of relationships," note Fitzpatrick, Jandt, Myrick, and Edgar—though this seems, to me, a reason for the study of relationships generally and for the importance of authentic interpersonal communication in relationships and not necessarily for the study of homosexual relationships.

Some Directions for Gay and Lesbian Research and Theory

Having established the need for gay and lesbian relationship study—perhaps—some directions for the intrepid researcher/theorist may be offered, suggestions with both academic and socio-political purposes:

One obvious direction for research and theory in gay and lesbian relationships is to test the existing theories of, say, social exchange, social penetration, relationship types, and so on. Mackey, O'Brien, and Mackey (1997), for example,

find that "opposites attract" among gay and lesbian couples whereas most studies find that it is similarity that brings and binds couples together. And Fitzpatrick, Jandt, Myrick, and Edgar (1994, p. 266) argue that the three approaches to relationships—relational topoi, relational communication, and relational typology—all suffer for limiting their application to ongoing heterosexual relationships."

Similarly, research and theory are needed to test the existing research findings. For example, gay men and lesbians use many of the maintenance strategies that heterosexual use but also strategies that are unique to the gay and lesbian situation such as seeking out gay and lesbian supportive environments (Haas and Stafford 1998). Similarly, Mackey, O'Brien, and Mackey find that money was a greater source of conflict for lesbian couples than it was for gay male couples—"For women, money is a huge issue. It relates to autonomy and control, and that can be very hard to work out" say Mackey, O'Brien, and Mackey. Blumstein and Schwartz (1993), on the other hand, find that lesbians actually place much less emphasis on money and argue about it less than gay men—venturing the theory that concern with money is a male preoccupation.

Testing the models of relationship development and to, more generally, chart the paths of gay and lesbian relationships is another obvious direction. The pattern that gay men and lesbians follow in developing relationships is probably different from that followed by heterosexual couples. Twenty, thirty, forty years ago, gay male relationships began with sex and then, if that was satisfying, talk would follow—maybe and then, maybe, a date—a term that was not widely used to refer to gay second and third meetings until fairly recently.

One of the more practical areas where research might focus is on the workplace. According to one study lesbians earn up to 14% less than similar heterosexual women (Lee, 1995). In a survey of 191 employers it was found that 18% would fire, 27% would refuse to hire, and 26% would deny a promotion to a person they thought was lesbian, gay, or bisexual [now.org/issues/lgbi].

Researchers need to explore relationship violence, a topic that was often ignored—probably on the assumption that such relationships don't really matter, are not really civilized, and deserve what they get. Fortunately, this situation is changing and more attention is being paid to the topic (Renzetti and Miley 1996).

Research and theory in gay and lesbian relationships is needed to further explore cultural influences and attitudes toward gay and lesbian relationships, toward homophobia, toward anti-discrimination legislation, and toward same-sex marriage. We're all familiar with the greater acceptance of gay and lesbian relationships in Denmark and the other Scandinavian countries and the much les acceptance in some of the more religiously dominated cultures, but researchers

and gay activists have been slow to exploit the persuasive values in such cross-cultural research and comparisons.

The role of friendship among lesbians, gay men, heterosexual women, and heterosexual men is another area about which we need to know more. As Martin and Nakayama (1997, p. 221) note: "Close friendships may play a more important role for gay people than for straight people. Gay people often suffer discrimination and hostility from the straight world. In addition, they often have strained relationships with their families. For these reasons, the social support from friends in the gay community often plays a special role." Even this seemingly obvious observation of strained relationships with families may be more myth than proven fact. Relationships with familiar may e equally difficult and strained for both heterosexual and homosexual children but just different. Certainly the anecdotal evidence exists but that may be a function of its dramatic impact potential for the media—an example of which was used earlier in the case of California State Senator Knight.

Research and theory in gay and lesbian relationships is needed to erase stereotypes, especially those that have serious social and political consequences. A good example is parenting. "There is no evidence to suggest that lesbians and gay men are unfit to be parents or that psychological development among children of gay men or lesbians is compromised in any respect relative to that among offspring of heterosexual parents. Not a single study has found children of gay or lesbian parents to be disadvantages in any significant respect relative to children of heterosexual parents" (milepost1.com/~gaydad/FAQ/Les.and.Gay.Parenting.html). And yet, the stereotype persists with courts ruling against the gay parent in custody battles (because the parent is gay) and with adoption agencies discriminating against gay men and lesbians.

The role of gay neighborhoods, meeting places, gay symbols and costumes, and gay meeting behavior—all discussed by Randy Majors in 1988 are useful research areas today.

One of the more obvious areas for theory and research is in self-disclosure, specifically, identifying the advantages and the disadvantages of self-disclosing one's affectional orientation. Similarity, the effects of outing and all its ethical implications need to be researched.

Research and theory is needed to explore the varied dimensions of relationship satisfaction. For example, Duff and Rusbult (1986) found no significant differences in relationship satisfaction and in the strength of the commitment between homosexual and heterosexual couples. And that's an interesting finding but we may want to know more.

And that generally was the goal of this paper—to demonstrate that we want to know more and that knowing more is a good thing.

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